

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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EPIPHANIES

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Text of a Sermon preached on the 2nd Sunday after Christmas

January 3, 2020

ISAIAH 60:1-7 | 72:1-7; 12-14

EPHESIANS 3:1-12 | MATTHEW 2:1-12

There is a traditional Italian story about an old woman named La Befana who was the most renowned housekeeper in her entire village. She would happily spend the day with her broom sweeping the floor, cupboards, and front step. The neighbors all knew her home was spotless. One day as she was sweeping, she was interrupted by a knock at the door.

When she opened it, she saw quite a sight: three strangers looking travel-worn but well-to-do. The first one said that they had traveled a long way. The second explained that they needed somewhere to rest and heard that her house was the most hospitable in the village. The third told her the strangest thing of all: they were following a star.

Old Befana eyed them warily. She had lived alone for a long time and was cautious. They did not look like robbers, but more like scholars or wealthy merchants or possibly royalty of some kind from lands far away. Hospitality was important and so she invited them in to stay. She showed them to where she slept and they settled onto her small pallet, pulling up her blanket, and falling asleep immediately.

In between sweeping, Old Befana checked on the strangers from time to time, but they did not stir. She wondered where they were from, and why they were following a star.

When they finally awoke in early evening, she offered them food and drink and asked them her questions. They told her they came from the East and were following a star that would lead them to a newborn child who was the king of the Jews, and who would be the king of all kings. The strangers wanted to reward her hospitality by inviting her along to find this child and bestow gifts upon him.

Old Befana had been so caught up in their story that she dropped her broom in surprise. To travel with three strange men following a star? It would not be proper! Besides, who knows how long it would be before they found this new king? Think of all the dust and cobwebs that would collect around her humble house! She shuddered as she pictured it and told the strangers kindly, but firmly, “No, thank you,” and wished them luck as they walked on into the night.

When Befana went to sleep that evening, she tossed and turned as she dreamed of the strangers, the star, and a baby bathed in light. When she woke up the next morning, she could think of nothing but the strangers, their story, and their invitation.

All the time she spent thinking about that little king who perhaps lived in a village just like hers interrupted her cleaning schedule so much that, at last, she had a change of heart and decided to follow the strangers after all.

That night, she set off on the road with her broom in one hand and gifts tucked in her apron, looking for the light of the star and peeking into every house along the way. If it looked like a child lived there, she would leave a little gift, as she could never be quite certain which child was born the king of all kings.

Navigating by the stars must be one of our oldest skills. Discovering the patterns in the sky came before the discovery of fire. Discovering that the movements of the stars and the planets could orient us in the most varied of circumstances, and get us back home, came before cooking, or tool making, or finding out what we were made of. We might say, astronomy is the first science, the first invitation to know, to discover what is in the world and how it works.

But, I dare say, it took us a very long time to look up into the heavens and see there the heart of a child as the force that should rule the world. What I love about every tale of the Magi, the scholar kings, is that they have the passion to follow a mystery that promises to unlock the greatest mystery – themselves – and that in the end, it means that our life could be about making our journey with gifts in hand. Like dear Old Befania.

We often forget that the Jewish people had their own astronomy. It is woven in the pages of the bible, from the first book to the last. Every tribe has its sign of the Zodiac. They shared the same knowledge base as the other cultures around it. In Numbers 24:17, in the midst of their desert wanderings, a foreign prophet would declare “a star out of Jacob will rule”. This was accepted as the foundation for all the prophecies of the coming Messiah who would fulfill Israel’s destiny. Israel was a Leo. The Lion of Judah would reign as everlasting king.

Astronomy does not have to lead us to astrology, to superstition. Rather it can lead us to the place where we know we will find the information we need, like at the palace of Herod, precisely because it is the information that will take down the false knowledge of the world, the deceptions of Herod. As we think of this story, let us always remember that the Magi were not in possession of special knowledge, but what was plain to all, if only they would look.

And if only we would persist, as they did, to set out on our dangerous journeys of discovery. Would you travel for a year and half, hundreds of miles, to get the answer to the one question that you need. Would you travel with the gifts you need at the moment you suddenly realize you have arrived?

Today, we may rejoice in that simple question that was written in the stars long ago. There will be a child, born to be King of the Jews. He, like all of us, has a star. His destiny, his power, his purpose, will come in view as we see his star rising. Where is this king? Are we on our way to him?

And when we arrive at his house, at his table, will we have with us the gift of ourselves to give, to acknowledge his kingship with gold, to acknowledge his priesthood with frankincense, and to acknowledge the mystery of his destiny with Myrrh. The myrrh is the key. It is the most valuable of them all, priceless, rare, to be used only on the occasions of great solemnity, as in birth or in death. At the moment we realize that God is with us, and we must serve him with the heart of a child.

And we must be prepared to live our lives, traveling our road, giving gifts to all the children that we meet, that we are meant to love and serve. We can be sure that is the greatest gift of all. The love that welcomed these magi in, wherever they went, is the gift that makes wisemen, kings.